Scenario Planning Part 1: Community Description

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LIM537: Legal, Ethical, and Strategic Fundamentals for Library Managers

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Background

Polk County, North Carolina is a rural community located in the Appalachian foothills of Western North Carolina. It shares its borders with the counties of Henderson and Rutherford, and with Spartanburg and Greenville Counties, SC to the south. Polk County is comprised of Tryon, Columbus, Saluda, Green Creek, Mill Spring, and Sunny View (see Figure 1). The county is known for its equestrian influence, as well as a number of influential artists such as Nina Simone, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Gillette.

Demographic Information

Polk County has a population of 19,413 people across 237.7 square miles (Census Reporter, 2021). 86.1% of the population is White, 4.8% are Black, 0.1% are Native American, 0.7% are Asian, 0% are Pacific Islander, 6% are Hispanic, while 2.3% are Other. The average age in Polk is 54 (Data USA, 2021) . 16.2% of the population is under 18, 53.3% are between 18 and 64, while 30% are 65 and older (Census Reporter, 2021). 92.4% of the population speaks only English, 4.8% speak Spanish, and 2.8% can speak another language.

The average income of Polk County is $33,485, with 9.5% of the population living below the poverty line (See Figure 2.)(Census Reporter, 2021). The average drive to work is 26 minutes, which is one minute over the average commute time for North Carolinians. There are 10,873 housing units, with 21% of these units being vacant. 77% of residents own their

home. We are currently seeing a decline in new residents, with a 22% decrease in new citizens.

School Information

Polk County is home to a relatively small number of public schools, with two high school options for the entire population: the Polk County High School, and the Polk County Early College, which is a small two room institution that is governed by the High School (Polk County Schools, 2019). There is one middle school, and four elementary schools in the county as well (See Figure 3.)(Polk County Schools, 2019). Since the county is so small, there is only one school district, which every school belongs to. There are approximately 2,300 students in attendance at these schools. There are also a number of charter schools in bordering counties as well, with many families commuting up to an hour so that their children may attend. Polk County has no higher education institutions of its own, but Isothermal Community College in neighboring Rutherford County has a campus in Columbus (Isothermal Community College). The Polk Campus has a very small number of courses available, with most students needing to commute to the main campus 30 minutes away.

Economic and Business Information

Polk County's top 4 economic sectors in order are as follows: Health care and social assistance, government, retail, and accommodation and food services (Foothills Regional Commission, 2022). 43.8% of Polk residents belong to the civilian labor force, with some of our main employers being

Saint Luke's Hospital, Polk County Schools, and the Tryon International Equestrian Center. This is lower in comparison with the rest of the state, which is at 62.4%, and the national percentage at 63.6%. I attribute this to the high number of retirees in the county, as the median age is 54 (Data USA). The unemployment rate is 3.1%, and is steadily continuing to decrease (See figure 4.) (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2023).

Much of Polk County's economy also comes from tourism. Located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the area is intrinsically beautiful. Mountains are always in view, and many visitors travel to the Foothills to witness the changing autumn leaves. Saluda is a major tourist town, as it boasts its annual Coon Dog Day festival and is a popular wedding spot for travelers.

Polk County is also home to a thriving equestrian community, and much of its industry comes from this demographic. Located in Mill Spring, the Tryon International Equestrian Center is well known throughout the equestrian world, hosting international events featuring riders from across the globe (Tryon International). The equestrian center is a common employer for Polk residents, and draws potential residents as well. Many of these prospective citizens relocate to the area from Florida, which also has a booming equestrian community in Ocala and Wellington.

Library Overview

Polk County has access to three libraries, the Polk County Public Library (PCPL) in Columbus, the small and volunteer-run Saluda Library in

Saluda, and the subscription/membership library, Lanier Library, in Tryon (Polk County Public Libraries, 2021)(Lanier Library, 2017). While it is not in Polk County, residents also have access to the Landrum Library located across the state border in Landrum, SC (Spartanburg Public Libraries, 2023). The PCPL is the largest of these libraries, and is located in the county seat, allowing ease of access for many Polk residents.

Major Issues

Content Warning for mentions of Domestic Violence and Abuse

Polk County's biggest issues involve internet connectivity, gentrification, domestic violence, and policing.

Due to its location in the rural Appalachians, much of Polk County is without internet. Cell reception is spotty (where it is even available), and the highest internet speeds are still fairly slow compared to more urban communities. According to the North Carolina Department of Information Technology (NCDIT), less than one in four mountain residents have access to fiber optic connections (NC Health News). Fortunately, an amount of funding has been granted to several areas by the state (See Figure 5).

22.7% of Polk County households are not subscribed to an internet service provider, in comparison to 18.9% of households in North Carolina and 17% of the rest of the United States who are also unsubscribed (Tryon Land Use Plan). I spoke with Tryon's Planning Director (who also happens to be my father), Tim Daniels regarding any plans to improve cellular connectivity across the county. For several years, Tim has been trying to

place a new cell tower atop one of Tryon's mountains (T. Daniels, personal communication, November 17th, 2023). I asked him to elaborate on this process, which he stated that they are still in the negotiation and leasing phase, and is awaiting the permit application. There has been quite some pushback from the community during town hall meetings, with many adversaries opposing this cell tower due to right-wing conspiracy theories regarding 5G reception.

While Polk County remains rural, many land developers have set their eyes on the community. North Carolina is a popular location among Florida residents due to its four seasons and its location relative to New York City. Many developers are attempting to capitalize on this reputation by marketing towards rich equestrians who come to the area to visit the Tryon International Equestrian Center. The town of Tryon is facing the brunt of this, with one person purchasing a large portion of downtown businesses, renovating them, and attempting to lease them. This has led to an increasing number of buildings that have been up for rent for a long period of time. Many Mill Spring families have been impacted as well. During the facility's construction during 2014, a number of families were evicted from low-income housing to make way for the Equestrian Center's construction. There are a number of homes available, but no apartment complex options in the county, creating a lack of options for lower-income residents to relocate locally.

The largest and most personal problem to me is the matter of the County's policing. On March 10th, 2023, my cousin Talia Petoia was shot and killed by her boyfriend. We believe that the perpetrator has ties to the Polk County Sheriff's Office (PCSO), who are attempting to sweep her death under the rug (Fogarty). He has not spent a night in jail, and still has access to guns. Our community is outraged, but we are powerless in our calls for justice, as the PCSO has also refused our requests to call the State Bureau of Investigation. Over the past 8 months, I have been involved with a small grassroots organization of friends and family members who are raising awareness and seeking justice for her death (Friends of Talia). Across our research, we have noted that domestic violence and biased law enforcement has been a common theme in our county's recent history. This issue is systemic at root, and the PCSO is closely intertwined with our county's only domestic violence shelter. The county sheriff is on the shelter's Board of Directors. The board refused to assist in any matters revolving around Talia's death due to political reasons.

Strategic Plans

I was able to receive the strategic plan for the town of Tryon, which is my location of residence. Tryon's strategic plan for development consists of three goals, each with associated objectives (Tryon Land Use Plan). The first of these Goals is to "Promote planned residential growth in harmony with resources and habitat most suitable for development while preserving community character and protecting the Town's natural areas" (Tryon Land

Use Plan). The town seeks to meet this goal by updating the Code of Ordinances, performing inventory assessments of community infrastructure, and by assessing and developing new policy approaches to promote sustainable residential growth.

Tryon's second goal is to support planned economic and commercial growth in the town while emphasizing local businesses (Tryon Land Use Plan). The town plans to meet this goal by continuing to assess infrastructure, drafting new policies, coordinating with key stakeholders, and collaborating with local organizations such as Tryon Downtown Development Association (TDDA), and Polk County Foothills Regional Commission (PCFRC).

The final of Tryon's goals is to provide a "balanced recreation and open space system" that meets the various needs of the community (Tryon Land Use Plan). To meet this goal, Tryon is dedicated to working with key stakeholders, maintaining current parks and recreation facilities, and pursuing funding to aid in the construction of new facilities.

Conclusion

Polk County is a small rural community located in the Appalachian Foothills of North Carolina. While I am anxiously awaiting the day that I am able to leave this area behind for good, I cannot help but be proud of my southern roots. Living in a sequestered area gives one a new perspective on life and community, and helps one to truly appreciate the smaller things in life. Rural southerners are resourceful and dedicated, and never afraid of a

challenge. I sometimes feel that Southerners are stereotyped to be uneducated “rednecks”, but this is not necessarily the case. The South is far more diverse than many realize, and I have had the pleasure of meeting many like-minded progressives that have shaped me into the person I am today. I am honored to have the opportunity to not only disprove stereotypes, but to take this special Southern perspective with me wherever I go.

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Appendix

Figure 1: A local map of Polk County, North Carolina. Includes rivers, lakes, the old railways, and major highways (Polk County).

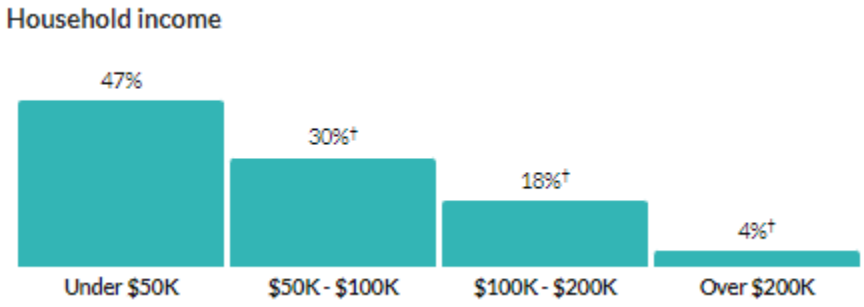

Figure 2: A chart showing the household income of Polk County, NC's population (Census Reporter).

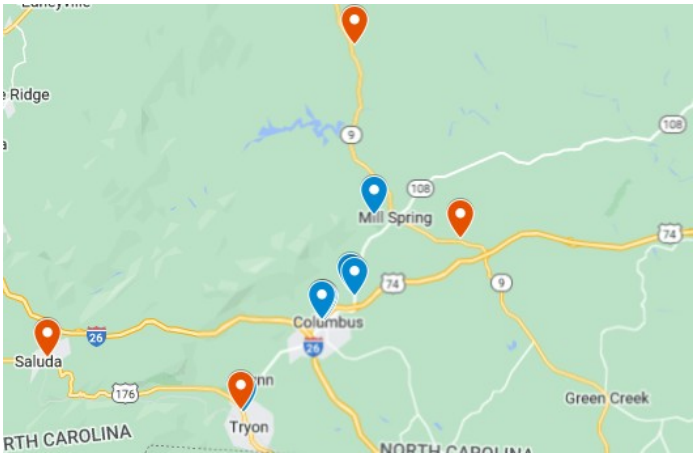

Figure 3: A map displaying Polk County School locations. (Note: One of the locations in Columbus is the school's warehouse and storage building). (Polk County Schools).

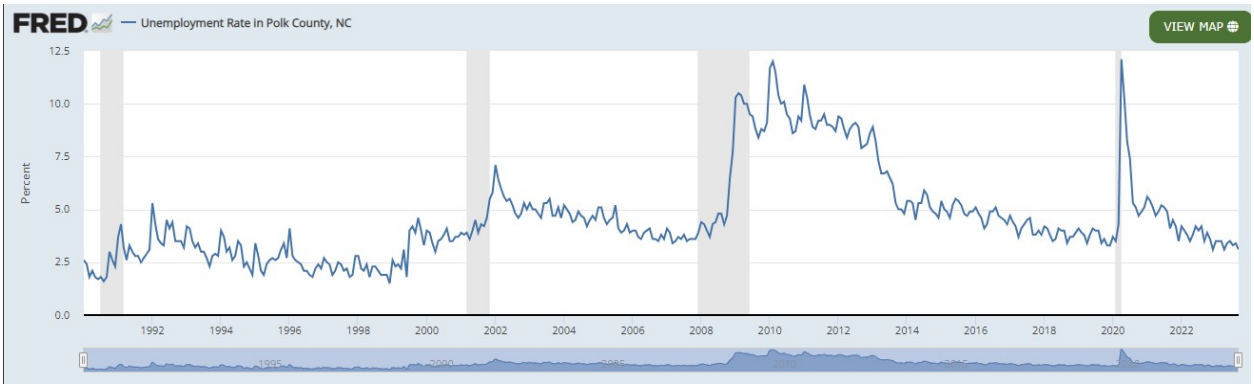

Figure 4: A graph displaying the unemployment rate of Polk County residents over the years (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis).

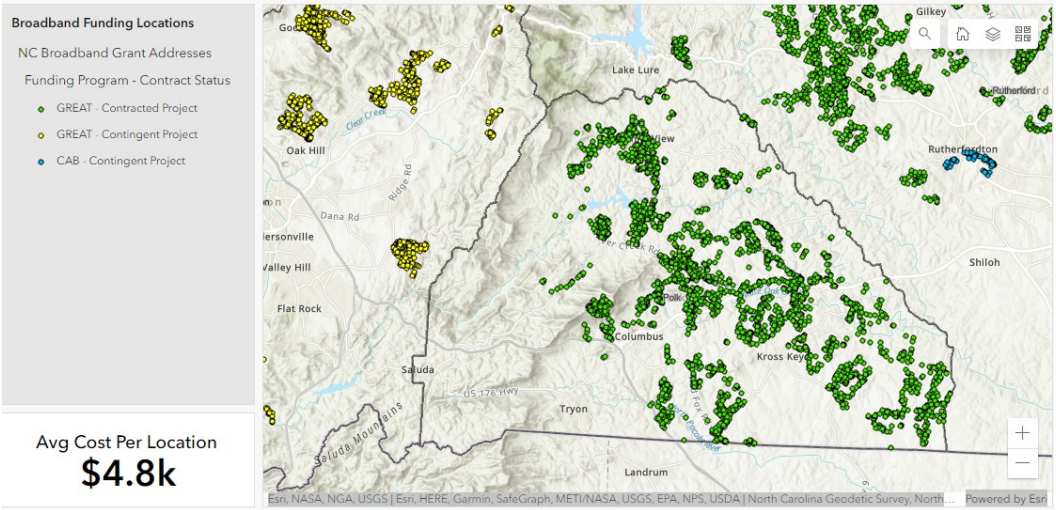

Figure 5: A map representing broadband funding locations of Polk County, NC. It is important to note that most of the grant funding is on the Western side of Polk County, which is its more rural region.